

Planning for quality early learning outcomes



In accordance with what Australians are calling for, the new federal government has indicated that improvements in educational quality and access, including early childhood, are top priorities. This is a promising beginning, but we will need to ensure that education remains a focal point and is delivered in the best possible way, in accordance with the findings of current research and the diverse demands of those communities in the most need.

New research continues to increase our understanding of children's early development and the public increasingly demands access to quality programs which reflect these advances in knowledge. Unfortunately, economically linked hurdles have led to gaps in children's learning and achievement: an indication that all is not well in our education system.

The importance of early development and learning has never been more strongly emphasised than it is now. This is reflected in the federal government's plans to increase preschool participation in the year, or two years, before formal schooling. This move will have long-term benefits, especially for the most vulnerable children, but ensuring that all young children – especially poor, minority and isolated children – have access to quality early childhood services is a challenge that cannot be underestimated.

For a start, there are not enough qualified and experienced early childhood teachers to meet existing staffing demands. Finding any teacher, let alone an early childhood teacher, willing and able to work in a rural, remote or outer urban community, where early childhood services are urgently needed, is already difficult; and, when teachers can be found, keeping them is even more difficult. Predictably, high turnovers of staff have detrimental effects on children's learning.

The collaboration between federal and state governments is essential to ensure early childhood provision reaches those children and families in the most need. And the time is right for this. Training more early childhood educators will take time and care, especially to entice staff willing to work in the most disadvantaged communities. Also, teachers, like other professionals, need incentives to work away from culturally safe or familiar contexts.

Taking teacher education – especially early childhood teacher preparation – to communities of the greatest need is a good way to encourage more 'home-grown' teachers. But then there are different kinds of challenges in providing teacher education programs in local sites, away from main campuses, even with advances in distance education technology.

Care must also be taken not to discount educational responsibility in primary, middle and secondary school. The early years are not the only 'window for development'. Critical development occurs throughout childhood and adolescence, and quality teaching and educational settings are essential for children of all ages, especially in the pre-teen and early-teen years.

I believe the top three educational imperatives for the next four years should be:

1. Quality programs
 - Ensuring all young children attend a quality educational program with a qualified early childhood teacher in at least the year before school.
 - Providing targeted early childhood care and education programs for the most vulnerable children in economically disadvantaged and rural and remote communities.
2. Quality teachers
 - Improving access to early childhood teacher education preparation, and increasing the number and quality of graduates.
 - Developing early childhood education standards.
 - Providing incentives so that high achieving secondary school graduates and mature students will want to become teachers and work in challenging and traditionally 'hard-to-staff' communities.

- Investing in teacher-mentoring and peer support.

3. Quality learning

- Providing clear expectations for teaching and learning programs in early childhood centres, and common goals for children's learning and developmental outcomes.
- Developing learning standards to complement program standards and inform curriculum development.
- Providing expert early learning opportunities in literacy, maths and science in the first years of school so all children are able to meet Year 3 learning benchmarks.

While many Australian families have access to the best early childhood care and education in the world, we must meet the challenges faced by remote, rural and economically disadvantaged communities. We must close the educational chasm between children from different social backgrounds. To do so will require careful thought, planning and action, along with strategic and judicious public and private investment.

Current research confirms the positive impact practitioners have on the quality of children's learning and developmental outcomes – at all levels of education. Accordingly, in this issue of *Every Child* magazine we explore the types of quality programs and initiatives that promote equity and enhance developmental and learning outcomes for children and, importantly, are in-tune with communities and targeted to meet the unique needs of diverse groups of children.

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